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ABSTRACT

The standards-based education reform movement has serious implications for students who are English language learners (ELLs), particularly with regard to wide scale assessment. Standards-based reform has been promoted nationwide through two federal initiatives--the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The 1994 reauthorization of ESEA (Improving America's Schools Act) requires states to apply standards and assessments to all students, including ELLs by the 2000-2001 school year. This issue brief addresses the critical issues in wide-scale assessment of ELLs. Also discussed are testing accommodations and modifications for ELLs, instrument validity and reliability, the alignment of assessment to standards, curriculum, and instruction, and the next steps in wide-scale assessment of ELLs. It is concluded that while the inclusion of ELLs in wide-scale assessment could be beneficial, it is unclear that the immediate inclusion of this population of students is appropriate given the testing tools currently being implemented and the high stakes for participation. 15 references are included. (KFT)

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What Are the Critical Issues in Wide-Scale Assessment of English Language Learners?

Kate Menken
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The standards-based education reform movement has serious implications for students who are English language learners (ELLs),[1] particularly with regard to wide-scale assessment. Standards-based reform has been promoted nationwide through two federal initiatives, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (H.R. 1804) and Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). For example, the 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA ("Improving America's Schools Act") requires states to adopt challenging academic content and performance standards,[2] and assessments aligned with these (Riddle, 1999). The legislation dictates that standards and assessments apply to all students, including those who are ELLs. By the 2000-2001 school year, each state must have an assessment system that includes ELLs and ensures that these students make "adequate yearly progress." With this new emphasis on the inclusion of all students, performance by English language learners on assessments can greatly affect the positive or negative evaluation of a teacher, school, district, or state. Wide-scale assessments also now carry high stakes for students in most locales, shaping major decisions such as graduation and grade promotion.

This Issue Brief addresses the critical issues in wide-scale assessment of ELLs. It is the sixth in a series of Issues Briefs concerning the education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

Inclusion of ELLs in Wide-Scale Assessment

Many states and school districts are currently using standardized tests on a wide scale as the primary assessment tool to ensure that compliance with the federal legislation is demonstrated through measurable student progress. The ESEA assessment provisions are based upon the belief that the inclusion of ELLs in these wide-scale assessments is key to ensuring that these students also benefit from standards-based reform and learn to high standards. However, difficulties arise because the standardized tests that most states currently employ were developed for the assessment of native English speakers – not for ELLs. Researchers are split between those who believe that only tests developed with this population of students in mind can fairly and accurately assess ELLs, and those who support the inclusion of ELLs in mainstream assessments through appropriate testing accommodations and/or modifications. While the process for including ELLs in wide-scale assessments continues to be debated, most states and school districts are following the latter path.

[1] *In this paper, the term "English language learners" refers to the same population of students termed "limited English proficient (LEP)" in federal legislation.*

[2] *Standards establish what students should know and be able to do as they progress through school.*

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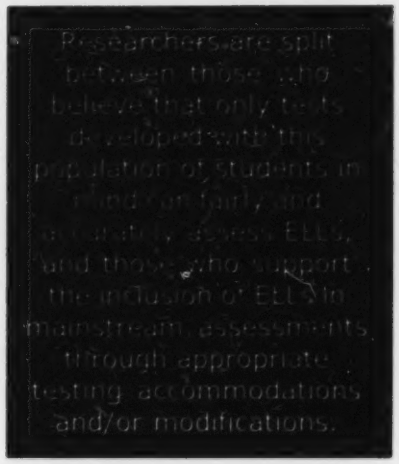
Regardless of *how* ELLs are included, support for *why* this population of students should be assessed on a wide-scale is summarized in the following:

> Inclusion in the testing program helps to remind districts and schools that students will need to receive at least the same quality and the same amount of content instruction as is given to other students (Rivera & Stansfield, 1998, p. 67).

Across the country, new efforts have been made to include ELLs in current testing practices. However, an analysis of reports from state education agencies recently compiled by the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE) for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) indicates that most states continue to allow ELLs to be exempted from wide-scale or mainstream assessments. ELLs are exempt from such assessments if they have been in the U.S. or enrolled in ESL/bilingual education programs for three years or less. They are also permitted exemption based on their English language proficiency level (Holmes, Hedlund, & Nickerson, 2000).


Researchers are split between those who believe that only tests developed with this population of students in mind can fairly and accurately assess ELLs, and those who support the inclusion of ELLs in mainstream assessments through appropriate testing accommodations and/or modifications.

Each year, significant numbers of ELLs are not included in any form of statewide assessments. As a result, there is no state record of the progress these students have made in their language development and/or attainment of content area skills and knowledge. For many ELLs, there is therefore no system of accountability in place to ensure that they achieve to the same high standards that have been set for mainstream students.

Unfortunately, there is no simple solution. While the inclusion of ELLs in wide-scale assessments could be beneficial, it is unclear that the immediate inclusion of this population of students is appropriate given the testing tools currently being implemented and the high stakes for participation. The following sections explore the potential complications when ELLs participate in wide-scale assessments, particularly those that were created for native English speakers.

Testing Accommodations and Modifications for ELLs

Efforts to assess student attainment of the knowledge and skills identified in state or local standards become particularly complex as states and districts move toward broader inclusion of ELLs in their standardized assessments and systems of accountability. The primary way that states and school districts include ELLs is by offering them the same tests as those taken by native English speakers, but with special test accommodations that are intended to "level the playing field."

Each state varies in the accommodations it permits, if any (Holmes et al., 2000). As identified in a study of state policies by Rivera and Stansfield (2000), accommodations can be classified into four main types:

1) *Presentation* – permits repetition, explanation, test translations into students' native languages, or test administration by an ESL/bilingual specialist;

2) *Response* – allows a student to dictate his/her answers, and to respond in his/her native language;

3) *Setting* – includes individual or small group administration of the test, or administration in a separate location; and

4) *Timing/scheduling* – allows for additional time to complete the test or extra breaks during administration. (Rivera & Stansfield, 2000)

Both Rivera and Stansfield's findings and NCBE's analysis of state reports on accommodations (Holmes et al., 2000) indicate that the most common types of accommodations fall into the categories of *timing/scheduling* and *setting* accommodations, which do not specifically address the linguistic needs of ELLs. *Presentation* and *response* accommodations can address ELLs' linguistic needs, but these are less commonly permitted. In other words, while accommodations are intended to make test content more accessible to ELLs, the most common types of accommodations are not well matched to the needs of this population of students.

Instrument Validity and Reliability

Including ELLs in wide-scale assessment raises many questions that must be addressed to ensure that assessment tools are valid, reliable, and appropriate for assessment of these students. For example, when accommodations are permitted, is the test still valid for the intended purpose? Does the test accurately measure the test taker's knowledge in the content area being tested? Does the performance by ELLs with accommodations compare equally to the performance by native-English speaking test takers?

Additionally, any assessment of an English language learner's content-area knowledge administered in English may be greatly influenced by the student's English language proficiency; testing done in English is first and foremost an English language proficiency exam, not necessarily a measure of content knowledge. Furthermore, it is uncertain at what point a child should be tested in a second language to yield meaningful results (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1997). And finally, there is great variance in how ELLs are defined within and between states, which greatly limits how well statewide results can be compared.

In spite of these issues in the assessment of ELLs, standardized tests are currently being used across the U.S. with major impact on individual students. Most states are now administering standardized tests, and using the results to make crucial decisions (Blank, Manise, & Brathwaite, 1999). ELLs are particularly vulnerable to high-stakes decisions based on test results; tests are used to make decisions regarding high school graduation, grade promotion, and the placement of English language learners into tracked programs (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). It is therefore imperative that attention be paid to this area.

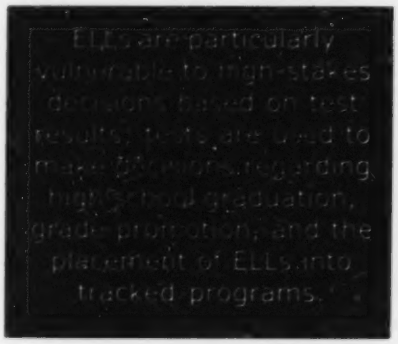
Alignment of Assessment to Standards, Curriculum, and Instruction

Standards are intended to be the critical lynchpin in reform efforts promoted through *Goals 2000* and the 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA, aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment. As such, they are meant to guide curriculum and instruction, and serve as the foundation upon which assessment is based. The ESEA mandates that by 2000-2001, "all states will have assessments aligned with content and performance standards for core subjects" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). At present, however, these elements remain disconnected from one another, which negatively impacts the education of all students.

The need for alignment of each of these elements is particularly critical for English language learners, as supported in the following quotation from the Illinois State Board of Education's *Language Proficiency Handbook*:

> The delivery of instruction and assessment should be identical in terms of the types of materials accessed, the grouping and interac-

tion of students, the language(s) used, and the techniques employed. In classrooms, that means the conditions for instruction and assessment should be identical...Assessment has to mirror curriculum if it is to be a valid account of what students know and are able to do...If assessment is an expression of the curriculum and the curriculum, in turn, maximizes the opportunity to attain designated Illinois Learning Standards, there is continuity in the education program for students. Anchoring curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the Learning Standards increase the validity of the educational program. (Gottlieb, 1999, p. 3)



These tenets extend beyond Illinois' standards, and apply to standards for ELLs in every state and school district. In order for assessments to be effective and useful for educators in instructional practice, they must be deeply entwined with the classroom teaching and learning driven by the standards. Educators are only just beginning to recognize how much change this actually entails.

> Most policymakers have yet to understand that content standards are only the first step in a process that also encompasses performance standards, assessment, accountability systems, professional development, teacher education, and resource allocation. Educators at the state and local levels are beginning to understand that none of this will work without close alignment among all the components and that the ultimate "test" is whether or not student learning is improving. (Cross, 1998)

Alignment of assessments with curriculum, instruction, and other aspects of education is vital for the successful implementation of standards-based education reform. This is an area to watch closely over the next few years, as states strive to put into place new and more effective educational systems.

Next Steps in Wide-Scale Assessment of ELLs

While new research has been generated such as the studies mentioned above, there is still a great need for additional information on how best to assess ELLs. The questions below are based on the literature reviewed, and may be used to frame an agenda for further research into the wide-scale assessment of students who are English language learners:

- Given that the assessments being used are high-stakes, what additional supports are needed to ensure that ELLs will be able to pass them?
- How do alternative assessments (e.g., Spanish language exams) compare to mainstream assessments? When is the use of native language assessments appropriate?
- How do accommodations impact comparability with mainstream student performance?
- Do wide-scale tests with the permitted accommodations fully expose English language learners' knowledge and abilities or does the system need to be fully redesigned such that the needs of these students are addressed in the development of assessments?
- Do other data collection methods, such as portfolios or other performance assessments, yield more accurate results with regard to ELLs than traditional assessments?
- What sort of information is needed to make fair high-stakes decisions about ELLs (e.g., grades, classroom performance, an array of samples of student work, teacher recommendations)?

- What would be the most beneficial system(s) of accountability to ensure that these students are making progress in what they know and can do in important content areas?

- What supports are necessary to aid states and districts in their alignment of assessments, standards, curricula, and instruction?

The heightened attention being paid to this critical area holds great promise for the education of English language learners, and presents the opportunity to ensure that they also achieve to high standards.

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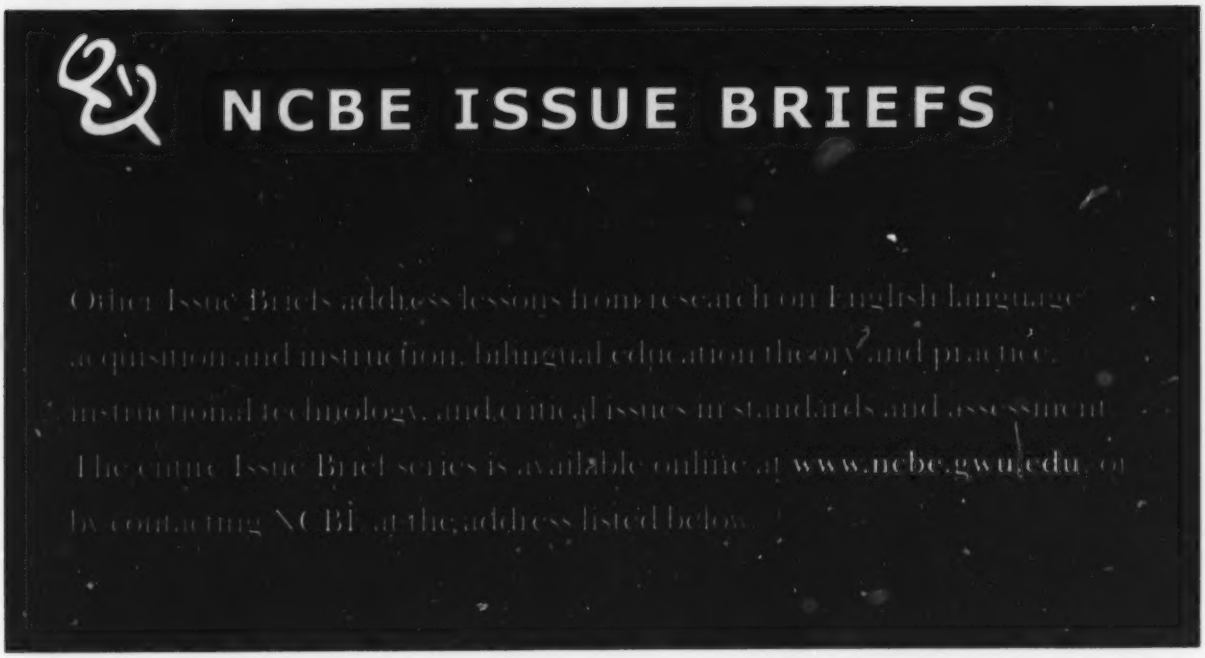
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